12 Years in, National City Has Only Booted Two Polluting Businesses From Residential Neighborhoods

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Jose’s Auto Electric on 18th Street in National City was ranked No. 2 on a list of the city’s top polluters. / Photo by Adriana Heldiz

National City wants to clean up its neighborhoods. But in the 12 years since the city passed an ordinance making it easier to boot industrial businesses located next to single-family homes, just two businesses flagged by the city as polluters have moved.

One of those two businesses simply moved across the street, where it continues to operate. The other relocated to Chula Vista.

And now, the city has stopped enforcing its own ordinance. It’s no longer trying to relocate the most egregious polluters operating in the rezoned areas, because it’s searching for a consultant that can run the effort.
A 2006 city ordinance allowed officials to relocate industrial businesses, but not until the city adopted a new community plan in 2010. That plan rezoned parts of National City to prohibit industrial businesses from existing next to homes and schools. Existing industrial businesses were temporarily “grandfathered in,” or allowed to stay, but remained at risk of being relocated by the city.

For decades, National City’s Old Town, a neighborhood that borders Interstate 5, has been home to dozens of industrial businesses that sit next to single-family homes, public parks and schools. Last year, a chemical spill at a business that was mixing two 55-gallon batches of hazardous materials caused an emergency evacuation. Three years before that, neighbors say they heard a series of explosions when a local auto shop caught on fire.

“We don’t feel like we can be safe at home with our kids,” said Alicia Sanchez, a National City resident. When deciding which businesses the city will ask to leave, a number of different factors are taken into consideration, including the total cost of the land, threats to public health and safety and the cost of relocation, to name a few.

By 2012, the city had compiled a ranked list of more than 100 businesses that were violating zoning rules. Those chosen to go through the process were given options: They either had to clean up; they were allowed to continue in their current locations until the city deemed the owners had recouped their investment, at which time they would have to move; or the businesses could relocate right away.

The city forced the two businesses at the top of the list to move in 2015. Jose’s Auto Electric on 18th Street was ranked No. 2 on the city’s list. Jose Ramirez, the owner of the auto shop, said once he was told to leave he tried looking for other properties in areas where industrial businesses are allowed. But then the owner of a building across the street offered him a deal, so he moved there instead.

The auto shop’s new location is still too close to homes, the city says, but the move means the auto shop’s former location can no longer house an industrial business, so the city considers it a win.

“You’re still reducing the number of nonconforming lots in the neighborhood,” said Raymond Pe, the principal planner for the city of National City. “You’re basically replacing one nonconforming use with another.”

And Pe said once the city starts enforcing the ordinance again, Jose’s Auto Electric may be asked to move again if it still ranks high on the list.

Ramirez understands what the city is trying to accomplish, but he said his auto shop does mostly electric work and doesn’t use any harmful chemicals.
“From the bottom of my heart, if I knew that my business was truly contaminating the neighborhood, I would leave voluntarily because I love the kids that live here,” he said.

After Ramirez’s auto shop and the other business relocated, the city’s process stalled. The city produced a new list of businesses last year, but never finalized it because it still hasn’t hired a consultant to oversee the effort. City officials say they haven’t been able to find a consultant they can afford.

National City Chamber of Commerce CEO Jacqueline Reynoso said her group supports tackling pollution, but the process itself needs improvement, especially when it comes to attracting new businesses that will replace the old ones.

The goal is to transition industrial properties to commercial or residential uses instead, Reynoso said, but not all businesses or developers are capable of doing the environmental cleanup necessary to make that work.

“So it’s unfortunately probably not going to be a small business to be able to take that challenge on,” she said.

Residents and local advocates say the pollution coming from businesses still operating in National City neighborhoods continues to be a problem.

“We have been discussing this for the last 12 years, but the problems go back 50 years,” said Sandy Naranjo, a policy advocate for the Environmental Health Coalition, who has been in the forefront of fighting pollution in National City.

The pollution the businesses produce has also taken a toll on neighbors’ health. National City ranks in the 85-90 percentile of California communities affected by multiple sources of pollution, according to the state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment.

Sanchez still lives in Old Town, but said her sister relocated to Chula Vista because of her daughter’s asthma, headaches, irritated eyes and rashes that were appearing all over her body.

“We want National City to change,” she said. “These types of problems are in low-income communities, and people think we don’t have a voice.”

Advocates and residents say the city's setback won't keep them from moving forward.

“It’s a struggle for environmental justice that’s been going on for years, and so we know that it’s going to take time and the businesses have more money and they have more power and influence,” Naranjo said. “There’s a lot of work that needs to be done. We want to keep the momentum going. We don't want people to give up.”